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ABSTRACT

Teachers at both college and pre-college levels have long realized that collaborative writing is an effective learning tool for beginning writers. Many have pointed out that collaboration in writing groups properly shifts the focus from the teacher to the student, and allows writers to take more responsibility for their own composing processes. Such group activity works wonders in giving confidence to beginning writers who don't trust their own voices and want to be told how to write. But collaboration is more than just a heuristic for beginning writers' invention. For mature writers, collaborative writing: (1) functions as a heuristic for discovery both of ideas and of organizing principles; (2) focuses on writing as problem solving; (3) gives writers a sense of audience early in the process; (4) allows writers to see that finding a voice depends on understanding the social milieu in which they write; (5) allows for editing intervention early in the process; and (6) parallels the way writing is done in the professional world. Collaborative writing's success as demonstrated in six instances of actual practice is the strongest argument for an adjusted view of the subject. Whether or not a strict definition for advanced composition emerges, writing instructors should be aware that collaboration is an essential part of all composing processes, and should be included in classroom exercises. (One appendix on the creating of a Storyboard is attached.) (PRA)

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Reassessing the Role of Collaborative Writing in Advanced Composition

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Over the past decade, teachers at both college and pre-college levels have realized that collaborative writing is an effective learning tool for beginning writers. Kenneth Bruffee, Anne Ruggles Gere, John Trimbur, Lunsford and Ede, and others (many others here at this conference) have pointed out that collaboration in writing groups properly shifts the focus from the teacher to the student and allows writers to take more responsibility for their own composing processes. In these groups, writing becomes a social act that permits students to discover and shape their own ideas through interaction with other writers. Such group activity works wonders to give confidence to beginning writers who don't trust their own voices and want to be told what to write and how to write it. Collaborative writing encourages these students to participate in the process rather than to sit back expectantly waiting to be told "the rules." But collaboration is more than just a heuristic for beginning writers' invention.

Post-structuralists assert that collaboration is our only hope for creating any meaning at all, and current composition lingo

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promotes "social construction" as the antidote to Derridian deconstruction. In other words, we collaborate with one another to build discourse communities that allow us to "share fictions;" that is, to agree upon how our language means in particular instances. Yet even with such importance attached to it, collaboration seldom makes it beyond the freshman writing classroom and is rarely discussed in the same breath as advanced composition. Why is this true?

For several reasons. **First**, the label "advanced composition" is amorphous, spanning many types of curricula from sophomore expository writing, to writing across the curriculum, to technical and business writing, to advanced nonfiction prose and so on. It's difficult to advocate a technique that will apply to so many different rhetorical situations, whereas the goals of freshman composition are nearly the same no matter how or where it's taught. **Second**, once we move beyond the freshman writing groups, we're not exactly sure what collaborative writing is. Does it mean a group of two or more people contributing to the same text? Does it include the preliminary thinking process? How about the various stages of editing? We're not sure what are its defining limits. Richard Chisholm of Plymouth State University is currently researching the nature of collaboration and has discovered that most professional writers don't believe they collaborate at all, even though they interact with other people in many ways during the life of their writing projects. **Third**, advanced composition is usually considered a more private activity where writers work to polish

fairly good writing skills instead of developing them from scratch as they did in earlier writing classes. The emphasis tends to be on the subtleties of composition: on tweaking style and on organizing for particular purposes, rather than on discovering and shaping ideas. Joseph Williams' outstanding book, Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace is one of the most popular texts for advanced writers, as they struggle with the nuances of their language. "What does collaboration have to do with that?" they ask.

Let me add a disclaimer here in response to that last question. I believe that writing can and should be partially a private act. Writers need to be able to sit down and compose by themselves and trust the quality of their prose. They also need to reach inside and find the voice that is theirs alone, not the result of "group think." What I am arguing is that the writing process should not be a totally solitary experience at any level--either in freshman composition or in more advanced courses or even in post-graduate writing situations. To write well, we need a combination of that lonely voice crying in the wilderness and the voice that is heard and changed by that hearing.

But because we have tended to use collaborative writing--or collaborative "learning" as it is sometimes called--only as a tool of invention, its potential effectiveness at other levels has been largely ignored. I believe that collaborative writing is especially important in the advanced composition classroom, no matter how you define ad-

vanced comp, because collaboration brings to the forefront many facets of composing especially important for mature writers.

For example, collaborative writing:

- **functions as a heuristic for discovery both of ideas and of organizing principles**

The way we use collaboration in freshman composition makes clear how this works in the discovery process, but writing groups can also help each other to develop the best arrangement for the text. Comments such as: "I think this idea is more important than that one," or "These two points seem to go together. Why not move them closer in the text?" or even "That's not the way I think about this subject. I need to approach it from another angle" encourage writers to see their prose from a variety of perspectives and arrange it so that it communicates most effectively.

- **focuses on writing as problem solving**

When a group gets together to tackle a writing project, the experience naturally becomes one of problem solving. "What is the task in front of us?" is a usual way to begin this process. "How can we accomplish our goals?" is the second question commonly asked. By the very nature of the group experience, writing is seen as a way to solve a communication problem, and the group members almost uniformly can keep the problem in focus throughout the collaborative effort.

- **gives writers a sense of audience early in the process**

This one is obvious. Once a writer has to make his or her thoughts public for the group, a sense of audience is born. It's tough to be writer-centered when the group surrounds you.

- **allows writers to see that finding a voice depends on understanding the social milieu in which they write**

This one, too, is fairly obvious, but it is essential. As writers collaborate on a project, they test their prose voices against each others and discover the differences between them, as well as the appropriateness of each style.

- **allows for editing intervention early in the process**

If a writer is collaborating at any stage in the writing process, she is simultaneously being edited, both by her collaborators and by her own critical eye. This continuous editing is highly effective and usually produces prose of much higher quality than that which is edited only in its final stages.

- **parallels the way writing is done in the professional world**

Most students will leave their undergraduate classrooms and exchange them for boardrooms, courtrooms, or other professional situations. The type of writing done in these environments is most often done in groups, not in solitude. Even scientists and engineers produce reports or papers that are collaborative efforts. Students who have only the experience of writing academic papers on their own will probably find their undergraduate training of little help in these situations.

Rather than discussing these concepts in the abstract, I thought it would be best to illustrate specific ways collaboration works in various kinds of advanced composition classes. Though the techniques used in some of the following examples have not been officially labelled "collaborative," that is precisely what they are.

1. John Trimble at the University of Texas at Austin has taught incredibly successful Advanced Writing Seminars in which students not only write pages and pages each week, but they also critique every word of all the other students' papers. When a student completes an assignment, she puts the paper on file at the library where it is read and commented on in writing by the rest of the class. At the end of one week, the author receives the critiqued paper covered with suggestions and gut responses from her peers. Admittedly, this requires

strength of character in both the author and the peer editors, but it develops a definite sense of audience. And the writing gets better.

2. Noel Perrin at Dartmouth has run an environmental writing course which uses some similar techniques to Trimble's in that the students critique each others' work. But Perrin adds the dimension of each student reading aloud to the group. After sharing his work, the student must sit silently while the rest of the class responds to the writing and evaluates its effectiveness. In this experience, the writer must let the writing do all the talking without his intervention. There is no room for the compensatory "what I really meant to say" syndrome. And while sitting in silence as if he is not even there, he gets valuable feedback on how the prose works on its own.

3. In my Advanced Legal Writing seminar at Northeastern University's Law School, the students collaborate in small groups on writing trial briefs and other advocacy material. Even when the students are not in groups but are responsible for writing individual assignments, each written product is critiqued in draft by two other students before it is finally submitted to me. The finished copy must be turned in with the earlier drafts attached along with a "Rhetorical Strategy" cover sheet that indicates the Audience, Purpose, and Rhetorical Techniques the writer worked with in completing the paper.

4. Ken Kesey's class at the University of Oregon recently wrote and published an entire novel, all written as a group exercise. The writing was done totally in class over the course of a year, and each student contributed significant portions to every chapter. Kesey describes the collaborative process this way:

> We divided the chapter into increments of one to fourteen. We designed the chapter on one of those white boards with wipe-off ink...We'd put [these section] numbers on lots in a hat. We'd draw lots and write.
>
> They would write and when it came time they would read that section. Then the next section would be read. We'd read it into a tape recorder that we passed around the table. It gave people a chance to hear what the person had written before them, to make few alterations in what they were writing. Then we handed the tape over to a secretary who transcribed it on the computer.

For more details about how the book, Caverns (Viking Press, 1990) came into being, see the wonderful article on it in College Composition and Communication, the October 1990 issue.

5. Kesey's idea of "storyboarding" works well as a collaborative technique for advanced composition. It can be applied to a variety of assignments--from the novel in Kesey's creative writing class to extended documents written in technical and business writing courses. As practiced in the workplace, storyboarding allows long texts, such as corporate proposals or instruction manuals, to be broken down into similarly structured "chunks" (modules) which are displayed on poster-

boards or erasable whiteboards [See Appendix A]. Writing groups can then work collaboratively with these visual props to outline the entire document. The group discusses each board and can physically rearrange them or revise them as necessary. Such a process allows a greater number of people to have effective input on document and text design than would be the case if each writer were given a general outline and asked to make individual suggestions about it.

6. Technical and business writing classes all over the country use collaboration as a standard part of the course. Writing projects parallel those done in the real world as students are divided into groups and are given responsibility for completing a documentation set, for example, or a newsletter, or a proposal, or other similar projects. The group itself determines how the work will be divided among the members and has group meetings to pull the pieces of the document together for written and often oral presentation.

* * * * * *

These examples' success in actual practice is the strongest argument for an adjusted view of collaborative writing. Whether or not we ultimately find a strict definition for advanced composition, we should be aware that collaboration is an essential part of all composing processes, and we should make special effort to include opportunities for such exercises in our classes. Instead of viewing

collaboration as a one-dimensional learning tool appropriate only for beginning writers, we should see it as an important writing technique that carries through from the more general freshman composition classes to the increasingly narrow discourse communities in which writers later find themselves.

Appendix A

How do you create a storyboard?

1. Project team defines document's purpose, audience, and scope.

2. Writer researches the subject and develops a focused outline.

   (a "focused outline" is an ordered series of topics that state content; topics are of equal size)

3. Each topic in the outline is expanded into a specification, which consisits of:

   * *headline*, taken directly from the outline
   * *summary*, an abstract of the text
   * *notes*, such as questions to reviewers, suggested examples, etc.
   * *exhibits* in rough form (tables, drawings, graphs, etc.)

4. These specifications, presented in order, are the storyboard. It is a model of the document that can be tested and changed collaboratively.

5. The storyboard is posted on the walls and the project team meets to review the storyboard. The model changes dynamically throughout the meeting.